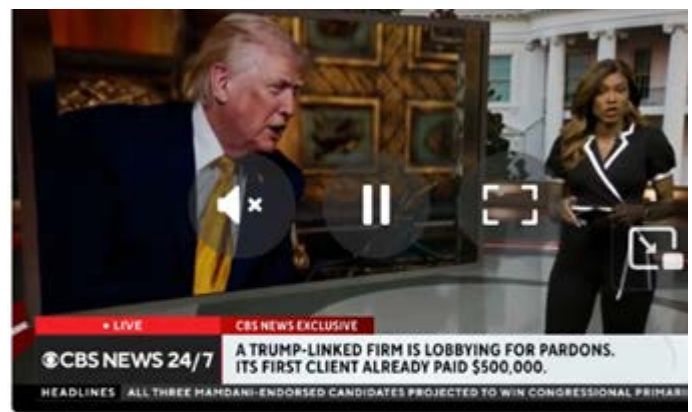


A Trump-linked firm is lobbying for pardons. Its first client already paid \$500,000.

By Gabe Kaminsky

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Trump-linked firm is lobbying for pardons, CBS News investigation shows

When President Trump returned to power, a group of his former campaign and administration officials started a federal lobbying practice. **Mo Strategies**, which has registered an array of corporate clients, is now expanding into the newly lucrative world of pardons.

Business is booming.

The Trump-linked firm has signed on to lobby for the law firm Blessinger Legal in Northern Virginia for "immigration and pardon-related discussions," federal lobbying disclosures in late May show. The engagement has already yielded the firm \$500,000 in income, and more work is expected, Marty Obst, president of Mo Strategies, said in an interview.

"We're one of the fastest-growing firms in D.C., and are helping them navigate the landscape and process," Obst told CBS News. "What I've tried to do is provide guidance of what the process looks like, and what types of cases would appeal to this White House."

He added, "There's a legal process and a political process for pardons and clemency."

The pardon work reflects how a cottage industry of well-connected lobbyists, lawyers and influencers who advocate on presidential clemency has flourished during Mr. Trump's second term. Mr. Trump has pardoned or commuted prison sentences for a number of his allies who were prosecuted, as well as those who hired people with ties to the president.

Obst, who is listed as one of the lobbyists for Blessinger Legal on disclosures, is a longtime political strategist who held senior roles on Mr. Trump's 2016 and 2020 campaigns, and was a senior adviser to former Vice President Mike Pence. The other lobbyist, Robert Goad, worked in the first Trump White House as a special assistant to the president on domestic policy and developed education policy for Mr. Trump's 2016 campaign.

The filing that listed the \$500,000 in income said that Mo Strategies lobbied the White House and the Justice Department for the law firm this year. White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said in a statement that Mr. Trump "finds it detestable that anyone would even attempt to profit off pardons" and that the administration has a "rigorous review process" before applications reach the president's desk.

A spokesperson for the Justice Department said that its pardon office "has received a record number of applications for clemency" and will review them "to make recommendations to the president that are consistent, unbiased, and uphold the rule of law."

"There has been no departure from this longstanding process," the spokesperson added.

Blessinger Legal was founded by Eileen Blessinger, an attorney who practices immigration law and has litigated cases before U.S. immigration courts, asylum offices and the State Department. Her firm specializes in removal proceedings and employment-based visas, among other areas.

As Mr. Trump's administration pursued an immigration crackdown, Obst said Blessinger contacted him for guidance on new policies and to have him review dozens of her clients' cases to determine which might be viable for a potential pardon. Some of Blessinger's cases have a criminal court component, including green-card holders who were convicted of a crime, though some of the pardon work could be for non-immigration-related cases, he added.

"The Biden administration really expanded government reach, sometimes unfairly," Obst told CBS News, without citing specifics. "In some cases, there were very aggressive prosecutions that seemed highly political. There are cases that

qualify as needing further review. Whether or not they get a pardon — there are no guarantees to that."

Based in Indianapolis, Mo Strategies has inked lobbying contracts since Mr. Trump's reelection with companies that have paid as much as \$530,000 per filing period, disclosures show. The highest-paying client has been Tencent America, the U.S. subsidiary of Chinese technology conglomerate Tencent, which Obst has helped to navigate U.S. trade and defense policy. Other clients have been NextEra Energy in Florida; Team Hemp, which represents the American hemp industry in D.C.; the Serb Republic and — most recently — Blessinger Legal, according to federal disclosures.

The \$500,000 income reported in a single period for Blessinger Legal represents one of the largest pardon-related disclosures in the U.S. Senate's database, according to a CBS News analysis. There have been over two dozen lobbying registrations in this area during Mr. Trump's second term, though only a tiny fraction have preceded clemency, records show. (Blessinger declined to comment for this story).

The largest amount, at \$960,000, was disclosed last year by political operatives Jack Burkman and Jacob Wohl on behalf of Joseph Schwartz — a nursing home operator who pleaded guilty to charges stemming from a nearly \$39 million payroll tax fraud scheme. Schwartz had served just three months of his three-year prison sentence when he received a pardon from Mr. Trump.

The Schwartz pardon is one of several that Senate and House Democrats are looking into as part of a broader investigation into clemency and alleged "pay-to-play" dynamics, CBS News reported. Should Democrats win a majority in the midterm elections in either chamber of Congress, Mr. Trump's clemency is expected to be a focus of their oversight efforts.

"I'm preparing for potential oversight from Congress, and so any decisions we make to engage, we are going to make sure it passes muster," Obst said about his pardon work.